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State of preparations for the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 52/187, the General Assembly decided to convene the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries at a high level in the year 2001 to assess the results of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the 1990s at the country level; to review the implementation of international support measures, particularly in the areas of official development assistance, debt, investment and trade; and to consider the formulation and adoption of appropriate national and international policies and measures for sustainable development of the least developed countries and their progressive integration into the world economy. Furthermore, the General Assembly decided that the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) will be the focal point for the preparation of the Conference. In its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly welcomed and accepted the generous offer of the European Union to host the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. The General Assembly also decided to designate the Secretary-General of UNCTAD as Secretary-General of the Conference, and requested him in that capacity to make all necessary preparations for the Conference. The General Assembly further decided to convene the Conference in the first semester of the year 2001 for a duration of seven days, at a venue and time to be determined by the Secretary-General of the Conference, in consultation with the European Union. The General Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the Conference to organize the Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee (in two parts) and three expert-level preparatory meetings (resolution 52/187, para. 1 (b)). The General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to it at its fifty-fourth session on the state of preparations for the Conference. The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

II. State of preparations for the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries

A. Official launch of the preparatory process for the Conference

2. In order to initiate the preparatory process for the Conference, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, in his capacity as Secretary-General of the Conference, has designated Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, Special Coordinator for the Least Developed Countries, as Executive Secretary for the Conference. Subsequently, he officially launched the preparatory process in the first inter-agency consultations convened by the Secretary of ACC for that purpose and in the first meeting of the Consultative Forum on 20 July and 21 and 22 July 1999 (see sect. II E and F below).

B. Consultations with the European Union and the European Commission

3. In accordance with paragraph 3 of General Assembly resolution 53/182, the Secretary-General of the Conference and the European Union (EU) have agreed to convene the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries at Brussels at a date to be decided upon between April and June 2001.

4. The Executive Secretary of the Conference discussed with the representatives of the European Commission questions relating to Conference facilities, the host agreement, including the financial cost and budget of the Conference, and the substantive preparations and organizational aspects of the preparatory process for the Conference. She held meetings with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgium and the liaison office of European Union NGOs at Brussels. She also had consultations with the current and incoming Presidencies of the European Union (Germany, Finland and Sweden, who will assume the Presidency of the EU at the time of the Conference). The European Commission has already informed its representatives in least developed countries to provide support to the country-level preparatory process.

C. Preparatory meetings

5. In accordance with paragraph 4 of General Assembly resolution 53/182, the Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee for the Conference is tentatively scheduled to meet at Geneva in September 2000 and in 2001 prior to the Conference, at a date to be decided. Arrangements, both financial and substantive, are being finalized for the convening of the three expert-level preparatory meetings.

D. Sectoral, thematic and country-specific round-table meetings

6. In paragraph 5 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the Conference, in consultation with Member States and in

cooperation with relevant organizations and agencies, to organize well-focused sectoral and thematic or, where appropriate, country-specific round-table meetings during the Conference to contribute to the work of the Conference. A preliminary exchange of views on the organization of these meetings took place in the first inter-agency consultation and the above-mentioned meeting of the Consultative Forum. The issue is still under consideration.

E. Mobilization and coordination of organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system

7. In paragraph 6 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly called upon the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank to link the forthcoming round table and consultative group meetings to the preparatory process of the Conference, and to ensure that they make substantive contributions to the Conference. The Secretary-General of the Conference has initiated consultations with the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the President of the World Bank to give operational effect to this decision at the country level.

8. In paragraph 7 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly requested the Administrator of UNDP, in his capacity as Convener of the United Nations Development Group, to ensure the full involvement in the preparations for the Conference of United Nations resident coordinators and country teams in the least developed countries. The Administrator has accordingly taken the necessary measures to fully mobilize the resident coordinators and country teams in support of the preparatory process at the country level.

9. In paragraph 8 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly called upon the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in consultation with the Secretary-General of the Conference, to convene an inter-agency meeting to ensure the full mobilization and coordination of all relevant organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, as well as other relevant institutions, for the purpose of preparations for and follow-up to the Conference. The first inter-agency consultation reviewed the preparatory arrangements for the Conference, exchanged views on substantive issues to be addressed by the Conference and discussed the contribution of United Nations organs, organizations and bodies to the Conference and to its preparatory meetings. Organizations and agencies, in particular UNDP and the World Bank, indicated their willingness to support the preparatory process at the country level. It was agreed that the second inter-agency consultation will be convened in the last quarter of 1999.

F. Consultative Forum on the preparatory process for the Conference

10. The Secretary-General of the Conference convened, at Geneva on 21 and 22 July 1999, the first meeting of the Consultative Forum on the preparatory process for the Conference. The main objective of the Forum is to serve as a medium of interfacing and consensus-building between the United Nations system and other stakeholders, discussing and exchanging views on the conceptual framework of the objectives of the Conference, as well as on the intergovernmental preparatory process. The membership of the Forum consists of representatives of least developed countries, representatives of the European Union Presidency and the European Commission (host of the Conference), partners in the context of the Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance Activities adopted by the World Trade Organization (WTO) high-level meeting on least developed countries convened in October 1997 (the International Trade Centre, the International Monetary Fund, UNDP, the World Bank, WTO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Office of the Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries, the Committee on Development Policy, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee, representing donors, the International Chamber of Commerce, representing the private sector, and representatives of NGOs to be identified in consultations with the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS). The meeting emphasized the importance of comprehensive country-based preparations for the Conference, where the least developed countries themselves will have a central role in the process. It stressed the importance of the involvement of civil society, including NGOs, and the private sector at both the country and international levels. It exchanged views on the organizational and substantive aspects of the Conference. It underlined the importance of the Conference resulting in feasible, tangible, measurable and action-oriented outcomes, as well as the importance of linking the preparatory process with other major forthcoming conferences/events, including the Third WTO Ministerial Conference at Seattle, UNCTAD X, the Millennium Assembly and the conference on finance for development.

G. Other related activities at the region level

11. At the thirty-third session of ECA/twenty-fourth meeting of the Conference of Ministers responsible for economic and social development and planning, and seventh session of African Ministers of Finance, held jointly during the period 6 to 8 May 1999 at Addis Ababa, resolution 834 (XXXIII) on the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries was adopted. In the resolution, the Executive Secretary of ECA was requested to provide support to African least developed countries in their preparation for the Conference at the country, regional and global levels.

12. ESCAP initiated preparations for the final review of progress in the implementation of the Programme of Action at the national, regional and international levels. The review will identify the constraints and impediments faced in the implementation in the Programme of Action and recommend measures to support the efforts of the least developed countries. The Commission will undertake subregional studies which will cover finance for development, social issues, external trade performance and economic infrastructure in the least developed countries of the subregion. The conclusions and recommendations from these studies will be considered at the fifth session of the Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries, which will be held in early 2001. The results of the regional reviews will be presented to the Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee and subsequently to the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries.

H. Civil society, including non-governmental organizations and the private sector

13. In paragraph 9 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly invited the Secretary-General of the Conference to make arrangements, on the basis of consultations with Member States, to facilitate the involvement of civil society, including NGOs and the private sector, in the preparatory process and the Conference. The representative of NGLS and the representatives of the International Chamber of Commerce were invited to the first meeting of the Consultative Forum of the preparatory process for the Conference. The Secretary-General of the Conference will continue to consult with member States, NGLS and the International Chamber of Commerce on the scope and nature of the involvement of civil society, including NGOs, and the private sector in the preparatory process for the Conference and in the Conference itself.

14. The Executive Secretary of the Conference discussed with the Executive Secretary of the liaison committee of European Union development NGOs on the role of NGOs in the preparatory process for the Conference and cooperation between European Union NGOs and the Conference secretariat.

I. Participation of the least developed countries in the preparatory process

15. In paragraph 10 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly decided to defray the cost of participation of two government representatives from each least developed country in the Intergovernmental Preparatory Committee meetings and the Conference itself through the use of extrabudgetary resources, and should those resources prove to be insufficient to consider all other options. The Secretary-General of the Conference has initiated steps to mobilize extrabudgetary resources for this purpose through discussions with the European Union on the budgetary implications of the Conference. He has also addressed an appeal to development partners of least developed countries to provide financial support to the preparatory process for the Conference, including participation of least developed countries representatives in the preparatory meetings and the Conference.

16. In accordance with the mandate of the Conference, i.e., the formulation of national and international policies and measures for the sustainable development of the least developed countries and their progressive integration into the world economy, the Senior Advisers to the Ministers of Trade in Least Developed Countries met in a coordinating workshop from 21 to 25 June 1999 at Sun City, South Africa, to prepare for the Third WTO Ministerial Conference. The workshop was sponsored by the Government of South Africa, UNCTAD and UNDP. Participants in the workshop adopted a communiqué, conclusions and proposals for a comprehensive new plan of action for integrating the least developed countries into the global economy. The outcome of the meeting was submitted by Bangladesh to the preparatory process for the Third WTO Conference, and was issued as WTO document WT/GC/W/251. The meeting also decided to submit its outcome to the preparatory processes for UNCTAD X and the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries, as well as to both conferences. The meeting also adopted a resolution on the Conference, in which it requested the Secretary-General of

UNCTAD, in his capacity as the Secretary-General of the Conference and in collaboration with international and regional organizations, to take into account, in the substantive preparation for the Conference, the proposals for the comprehensive new plan of action. The meeting requested least developed countries development partners, both bilateral and multilateral, to provide adequate financial and technical resource to the Conference secretariat to ensure an efficient and effective preparatory process. It emphasized the importance of a comprehensive and participatory preparatory process at the country level, and requested the Administrator of UNDP to fully mobilize United Nation resident coordinators to actively support the preparatory process at the country level.

J. Preparation at the country level

17. In launching the preparatory process for the Conference, the Secretary-General of the Conference emphasized the importance of a comprehensive and participatory preparatory process at the country level, which should involve interministerial departments, civil society, private sector and local government representatives. Such an approach should lead to the formulation of a relevant and legitimate national-level comprehensive programme of action for each least developed country. These programmes will become the basis for formulating an umbrella global programme of action to be agreed at the Conference. He addressed a note verbale to the Governments of the least developed countries, inviting them to initiate the preparatory process at the country level. He informed them that in order to facilitate the preparatory process at the country level, representatives of the Executive Secretary of the Conference will be approaching the competent authorities in the least developed countries with the purpose of initiating discussions on the preparatory process at the country level.

K. Advocacy and promotion for the Conference

18. In paragraph 11 of its resolution 53/182, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the United Nations, with the assistance of concerned organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, including the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat, to take necessary measures to intensify their public information efforts and other relevant initiatives to enhance public awareness in favour of the Conference, its objectives and significance. The secretariat of the Conference has initiated discussions with the Department of Public Information on the formulation of an information strategy and a joint work programme during the preparatory process for the Conference.